



February 24, 2022

To: Environment Committee

From: Scott Smith, Communications Director, Friends of Animals

Regarding: Support for H.B. 5140 AN ACT CONCERNING THE HAND-HARVESTING OF HORSESHOE CRABS IN THE STATE

On behalf of Darien-based Friends of Animals, an international animal advocacy organization with 6,000 members in Connecticut, I respectfully ask members of the committee to support HB 5140, which would ban the hand capture and killing of horseshoe crabs in Connecticut.

The protection of this vital marine species is critical – and long overdue. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, which oversees management of the species on the East Coast, has downgraded the stocks of horseshoe crabs in the New York Region, which includes Long Island Sound, in each of the past three assessments, from Good in 2009 to Neutral in 2013 to Poor in 2019.

Research shows that the adult spawning populations in Long Island Sound are not only declining to precariously low levels but worse, the breeding population is aging, with not enough younger horseshoe crabs to replace older ones. The crabs, which live as many as 20 years, do not begin to breed until they are about 10 years old.

The bulk of Connecticut's horseshoe crab cull is done by a dozen or so seasonal fishers and sold as bait, used to catch whelk and American eel, itself a depleted species. The whelk, or conch, are sold to restaurants; eels captured in pots using horseshoe crabs as bait have traditionally been sold as luxury food for European markets and as bait to catch game fish.

The state of Connecticut lags behind its neighbors in efforts to protect this imperiled "living fossil," one that is important to the survival of several other species, including a number of migratory shorebirds, who rely on horseshoe crab eggs to fuel their flights north. New Jersey declared a moratorium on horseshoe crab harvesting in 2008. New York has a quota of 366,272 horseshoe crabs per year but caps the limit at 150,000, and over the past two years has closed the fishery during peak spawning times at the end of May and beginning of June. The quota for Connecticut's annual haul is an unsustainable 48,689.

As Jennifer H. Mattei, Ph.D. Professor, Department of Biology, IUCN Species Survival Commission Horseshoe Crab Specialist Group, has testified, “due to very low population numbers the horseshoe crab is functionally extinct in Long Island Sound.”

“The density of spawning horseshoe crabs is so low that the females cannot find mates and therefore this population is not reproducing at its maximum potential. The horseshoe crabs in Long Island Sound are not endangered of extirpation, at least currently, but their ecological role has been severely diminished. Horseshoe crabs function as a dominant species and their abundance is what is of ecological importance. They are no longer a source of food for shorebirds and fish in Long Island Sound. No eggs are washed into the surf,” says Dr. Mattei.

Given the precipitous decline in horseshoe crab populations in Connecticut waters, CT DEEP’s proposed reduction in daily quotas for the hand harvest of horseshoe crabs and partial limits on days when the crabs can be taken do not go far enough to protect this ancient and important marine species.

A total ban on the harvest of horseshoe crabs in Connecticut waters is a necessary step toward restoring the health of the once prodigious but now imperiled ecosystem of Long Island Sound.

As a registered voter in Westport, CT, I urge the committee to vote for HB-5140 and to gather support among your colleagues for passage this session.

Respectfully,

Scott Smith

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